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## About Us

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### Some Kankakee Fire Department HistoryThe HorsesCivil Service

Research By: Lt. Ronald L. Homberg - Retired Edited By: Asst. Chief David Harmon The following information was obtained from the book, *Of The People*, written by Mary Jean Houde and John Klasey in 1968 and from copies of local newspapers on file at the Kankakee Public Library. On Sunday afternoon, May 1, 1887, the most disastrous fire to date struck Bachant's agricultural implement building on West Avenue. For a time, it appeared that every structure north of Court Street and west of the Illinois Central Railroad tracks would be consumed by the raging flames. When the fire was finally extinguished around 4:00 P.M., twenty-two (22) structures had burned to the ground. When the day ended, two facts had become clear - Kankakee had just survived the worst fire in its history, and had found its fire department sadly lacking. Had it not been for the help of the well equipped and well-trained state hospital fire department, the loss would have been far greater. The City Council got the message. On May 19, 1887, a call was issued for the formation of three volunteer fire companies. The three companies, with officers and a regular drill program, would give the city a nucleus of trained men for handling most fires. Hose Company No. 1, which was made up from young businessmen was the first to respond. Then came Hose Company No. 3 (southside). Then the Hook And Ladder Company was formed. Finally Hose Company No. 2 (westside) was formed. During this time, Mayor F.D. Radeke was Acting Fire Chief. On Monday, November 14, 1887, Frank D. Hatch was appointed Fire Chief by Mayor Radeke. Mr. Hatch who was a local businessman and a Captain on Hose Company No. 1, was the first person to hold the title of Fire Chief. He served in this position through April 30, 1888, at which time he became Mayor, being elected in the April election. He served a one year term as Mayor. He also served again as Fire Chief from 1889-1896. Frank D. Hatch was the only Fire Chief to be elected Mayor. During the last one hundred nineteen (119) years, between 1887 and 2006, there have been twenty (20) Fire Chiefs and two (2) Acting Fire Chiefs who did not receive permanent appointments. There have been eight (8) Chiefs retired on pension, after serving twenty (20) or more years on the department. Seven (7) of these Chiefs started as rookie firefighters and were promoted through the ranks to eventually become Chief. The Chief of the volunteer department to serve the longest in that position was Irving W. Powell, who was Chief from 1896-1907 (11 Years). The last Chief of the volunteer department was Gottlieb H. Hinderer, who was Chief from 7-01-1907 to 8-15-1910. The first Chief of the paid department was Fred Kaiser, who was appointed on 8-15-1910 by Mayor Henry Beckman. The Chief to serve the longest in that position was Roy Marquart, who was Chief from 1935-1953 (18 Years). He also served in that position for four (4) months in 1918-1919. He had served on the department for two (2) years from 1917-1919. He was the first Chief to retire on pension after twenty (20) years of service. The Chief to serve the most years on the department was Roger Regnier. He served thirty-seven (37) years from 1946-1983, serving as Chief for the last eight (8) years. The firefighter to serve the most years on the department was Captain Eli Odette. He has been referred to as the "Daddy Of The Fire Department". He was appointed to the volunteer department in 1888 and continued serving on the paid department. He served continuously under every administration until 1923 (35 Years). He returned in 1925 and served until 1931, making a total of forty-one and one half (41.5) years. He served as Captain for many years. He had been appointed Captain under the political system and continued under the Civil Service Commission, which is known today as the Fire And Police Commission. The Horses In the days before the introduction of the motorized equipment, a team of horses was used to pull the fire wagons. The city would contract with livery barn owners, to supply horses and a driver for the fire wagons. Myron F. Baker's Livery, which was contracted by the city, supplied a team of horses and a driver for Hose Company No. 1. Baker's Livery was located on Schuyler Avenue, where in later years the location was occupied by the Remington Theatre, the Majestic Theatre, and the Town Cinema Theatre. At the time the livery was there, the address was listed as 312 Schuyler. The Hitch Barn was across the alley and its address was listed as 319 Dearborn. Baker's fire team "Sam" and "John" have learned quickly to respond to the fire signal. As soon as the spring strikes the gong and throws open the doors of the stalls, the intelligent animals bound out and lowering their heads to avoid the suspended harness, place themselves in perfect position on each side of the pole for the harness to descend upon their backs. Sam is the "off" or right hand horse of the team and John the "nigh" or left hand horse. They are so perfectly matched that the ordinary observer would fail to see any difference between them. The hitch was made and the driver in his seat in 22 seconds. This is good for a team that is new at the business. The horses for No.2 Hose Company, which is located on the west side, were supplied by Mose Betourne's Livery. Mose had four horses in the barn-two of which were white and two of which were black. The black ones were for funerals, bus service, and picnics, but the white ones-"Prince" and "Jim" were reserved for fire calls. As soon as the fire alarm was sounded at the old west side fire house, a bell at the Betourne homestead, which was located one-half block west, would clang out, warning everyone in the neighborhood to watch out-"Old Nose Betourne will be headed for the fire house with those go! Burn horses." As soon as the two horses heard the gong, they began pawing the ground and snorting because they new there was a fire somewhere. In a matter of a few minutes, Mose had the horses over to the fire house, hitched up and away. On April 11, 1911, "John" one of a team of Kankakee's favorite fire horses, dropped dead at the alley intersection on Court Street, between Schuyler and Dearborn Avenues, about 9 O'clock in the morning. Heart failure is assigned as the cause of the animal's death. The team well known as "John" and "Sam" had been hitched to the fire wagon and taken out of the stable for exercise. They left the stable on Schuyler Avenue and were driven south to Court Street and turned east. As they approached the alley, it was noticed that "John" was acting strangely and apparently was very sick and in a dizzy condition. Therefore, the driver turned them north into the alley with the intention of returning them to the barn, through the rear entrance. Just as the team turned toward the alley, the animal staggered and fell to the pavement, and died almost instantly. The team was an unusually high-spirited one and had been in the Kankakee Fire Service for several years, being purchased and used exclusively for that purpose several years ago by M.F. Baker, then owner of the

stables at which they were kept. The horses were brothers and were about 19 years of age. The dead animal was valued at about \$200. Civil Service On Tuesday, September 4, 1928, in a special election, the citizens of Kankakee, voted in Civil Service for Firemen and Policemen by four hundred thirty (430) votes. On Monday, October 1, 1928, Mayor Louis E. Beckman appointed Fred Geisking, Fred Roach, and Harry Topping to the Civil Service Commission. On Monday, October 8, 1928, the Civil Service Commission held its first meeting. Fred Geisking was elected chairman and City Clerk Harry C. Thompson was elected secretary. Prior to the establishment of the Civil Service Commission, or the Fire and Police Commission as it is known today, all appointments to the Fire and Police Departments and all appointments within these Departments were made by the Mayor with the approval of the City Council. When the Mayor changed, so did the Chief of Police, the City Detective, and the Sergeants, along with some of the Patrolmen. The Fire Chief, the Assistant Fire Chief, and some of the Firemen also changed. In 1923, Democrat Benjamin W. Alpiner was elected Mayor, running on the People's Party Ticket. Mr. Alpiner had been Mayor twice before. (1911-1913, 1915-1917) Upon taking office, Mayor Alpiner fired the entire Police and Fire Departments. He had to make room for his supporters who helped him get elected. After the creation of the Civil Service Commission, promotional examinations were conducted. On 9-16-1929, firefighters Paul Marcotte, Harry Holz, and William Palzer took the examination for promotion. On 5-20-1930, the Civil Service Commission announced that four men of the Fire Department had been appointed to officer's positions. Eli Odette and William Palzer were appointed Captains and Paul Marcotte and Harry Holz were appointed Lieutenants. These were the first Fire Department promotions by the Fire And Police Commission. In 1943 Kankakee Firefighters Local 653 was chartered by the International Association of Firefighters. On 10-01-1945, a city ordinance was passed creating the positions of Captain, Engineer, and Assistant Engineer. On 10-23-1945, firefighters Russell Baker and William Palzer were appointed Captains. Owen Oesterle was appointed Engineer and Sam Mitchell was appointed Assistant Engineer. These men held these positions until their retirement. At that time, the positions of Engineer and Assistant Engineer were eliminated. The position of Assistant Chief had been in the Fire Department since the days of the volunteer companies. In 1947, after Asst. Chief Noah Betourne retired, the position was eliminated. On 6-02-1947, a city ordinance was passed creating the positions of four (4) Lieutenants. Appointments to be made by the Fire And Police Commission after examination. On 6-06-1947, the Fire And Police Commission held examinations for two (2) Captains and four (4) Lieutenants. On 6-14-1947, the Fire And Police Commission announced the promotions of the following firefighters. Captain James P. Marnell and John R. Marquart. Lieutenant Urban Brule, Francis Beck, Louis Homberg, Clarence Devine. On 2-03-1958, a city ordinance was passed creating the position of Senior Captain. The purpose of this position was to establish a person to be in charge of the Fire Department in the absence of the Chief or if the Chief was incapacitated. This position which was appointed by the Mayor, paid a higher wage than the rank of Captain. On 2-21-1958, John R. Marquart was the first Captain appointed to the position of Senior Captain. Roger Regnier was the last Captain to hold this position on 5-17-1971. These are the only two persons to hold this position. On 5-17-1971, a city ordinance was passed creating the position of Assistant Chief and eliminating the position of Senior Captain. Senior Captain Roger Regnier was appointed Assistant Chief. On 10-02-1961, a city ordinance was passed creating the rank of Fire Inspector. On 4-17-1966, the Fire And Police Commission promoted firefighter Richard Guimond to the rank of Fire Inspector and firefighter Albert May to the rank of Asst. Fire Inspector. On 3-19-1967, Albert May resigned the rank of Asst. Fire Inspector and returned to shift work as a firefighter. On 3-16-1970, the Fire And Police Commission promoted firefighter Billy L. Foster to the rank of Asst. Fire Inspector. On 1-20-1975, Fire Inspector Richard Guimond was appointed Asst. Chief. On 5-16-1975, the Fire And Police Commission promoted Asst. Fire Inspector Billy L. Foster to the rank of Fire Inspector. The Asst. Fire Inspector rank was eliminated and Lieutenants were assigned to work in the Fire Prevention And Inspection Bureau. Albert May and Billy L. Foster are the only persons to hold the rank of Asst. Fire Inspector. On 6-01-1987, Fire Inspector Billy L. Foster was appointed Asst. Chief. Richard Guimond and Billy L. Foster are the only persons to hold the rank of Fire Inspector. After the appointment of Billy L. Foster to Asst. Chief, the rank of Fire Inspector was eliminated and a Captain was assigned to supervise the activities of the Fire Prevention And Inspection Bureau. In 1995 the Fire Department under fire Chief David St. John took over the management of the cities Code Enforcement, Building, and Animal Control Departments. Assistant Chief Terry Lewis was assigned to oversee these departments. In 1996 Capt Ron Young was appointed as Acting Assistant Chief in charge of operations and maintenance under Chief Richard Kamerad. In July of 1997 Ron Young was officially appointed as Assistant Chief. In January of 2003 Assistant Chief Lewis retired and Code Enforcement, Building, and Animal Control departments were again separated from the fire department. In December of 2004 Ron Young was appointed Fire Chief upon the retirement of Chief Kamerad. On the same day Captain David Harmon was appointed to the rank of Assistant Chief. In March of 2005 Captain Earnest King was promoted to Assistant Chief. He was the first African American to hold the rank of Captain or Assistant Chief with the Kankakee Fire Department.